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ABSTRACT

The influence of family on institutional choice and post-freshman persistence of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students was studied at a small Bible college with a freshman retention rate of 86 percent. Data included interviews with 29 of the college's 62 AI/AN students. Findings indicate that family had both a positive and negative influence on choosing a college, as well as positive and negative influences on persistence beyond the pivotal freshman year. Positive influences of family related to choosing a college included encouragement to attend, encouragement by example, and encouragement to succeed. The negative influence of family related to choosing a college consisted of bias against Bible colleges. Positive influences of the family on student persistence included encouragement to succeed, spiritual encouragement, and encouragement by example. Family influences that discouraged persistence included family responsibilities and financial difficulties. Recommendations include conducting more research on the changing dynamics of AI/AN families, involving the entire family in student recruiting efforts, and providing funding mechanisms for economically disadvantaged AI/AN students. (Contains 63 references.) (TD)



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# Family and its Effect on Institutional Choice and Post-Freshman Retention of American Indian/Alaska Native Students at a Bible College

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of family on institutional choice and post-freshman persistence of AI/AN students at a Bible college. American Indian College is a small Bible college in Phoenix, Arizona with a 78% AI/AN population (Spring 2000) with an enrollment at that time of 81 students. The site selection is significant because the college's 1999 freshman retention rate was 86%.

A qualitative study conducted by Saggio (2000) using focus groups yielded four grounded concepts related to AI/AN institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year at a Bible college. This paper presents the findings of one of those grounded concepts: family.

A total of 29 students were interviewed, comprising 47% of the total AI/AN population of the Bible college, N=62. Strengths of Saggio's (2000) study included the pre-screening of the questions by AI/AN staff members of the college to ensure the appropriateness of the questions, a meeting with a panel of senior AI/AN officials of the Bible college to clarify the initial data findings, the use of an AI/AN moderator, and the sample size in relation to the N. Also, 67% (18/27) of the tribes at the Bible college were represented. Finally, there was also a good gender balance including 45% male participants (13/29) and 55% female participants (16/29).

Limitations included the small number of tribes involved compared to national totals, the non-random use of participants, the small size of the school limited the number of available participants, and the results of the study cannot be generalized to AI/AN students in general.

Family was found to have both a positive and negative influence on choosing a college, as well as positive and negative influences towards persistence beyond the pivotal freshman year. Positive influence of family towards choosing a college included encouragement to attend, encouragement by example, and encouragement to succeed. The negative influence of family towards choosing a college consisted of bias against Bible colleges.

Positive influence of the family towards persistence included encouragement to succeed, spiritual encouragement, and encouragement by example. Negative influences of the family towards persistence included family responsibilities and family financial difficulties.

Recommendations for scholars, practitioners, and policy makers concerning family dynamics as they relate to AI/AN students are also provided.

## Introduction

The AI/AN population has been determined to be significantly at risk in terms of collegiate persistence (Saggio, 2000 & 2001; Colbert, 1999; Benjamin et al., 1993; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tierney, 1992; Wright & Tierney, 1991; Pavel, 1991; Astin, 1982). Accordingly, it is no surprise that approximately 75% of all AI/AN students who begin college drop out before completing a baccalaureate degree (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992; Wells, 1997). Wells (1997) determined that the AI/AN freshman retention rate was 46.7%, meaning that nearly one out of every two AI/AN students enrolling in college drop out before they begin their sophomore year. Not only is the freshman year pivotal, but many of the problems experienced by AI/AN students begin long before their matriculation in college (Demmert, 1996; Dehyle, 1992; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992).

A great deal of research has been done in the public sector of higher education examining the factors of AI/AN retention and persistence (Colbert, 1999; Wells, 1997; Melchior-Walsh, 1994; Benjamin et al., 1993; Tierney, 1992; Wright & Tierney, 1991; Pavel, 1991; Falk & Aitken, 1984). However, at the present time there is little or no research on how AI/AN students fare at private sectarian colleges such as American Indian College, the focus of Saggio's (2000) study. This paper addresses Saggio's (2000) findings on how the family affects both institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year for AI/AN students at a Bible college.

## Experiences Associated with Low Retention for AI/AN Students

AI/ANs and other minorities have not fared well in educational attainment. Astin (1982) indicates that family background, including socio-economic and educational status, correlates positively with increased rates of persistence for children of minority parents. As a result, those who come from families with low parental educational attainment and income have greater difficulty persisting to an undergraduate degree. Students born into families that are low in socio-economic (SES) status may find it difficult to compensate for the inadequacies they encounter, such as inadequate technology, weak support system, financial deprivation, and cultural gaps that seem impossible to bridge (Garrod & Larrimore, 1997; Demmert, 1996).

## Literature Review

Current research has identified a number of areas that AI/AN students struggle with in their quest to persist in higher education. These areas include cultural discontinuity (Saggio, 2000 & 2001; Colbert, 1999; Demmert, 1994), low academic attainment (Pavel, 1999; Wells, 1997; Rendón, Nora, Gans, & Calleroz, 1997; Gilbert, 1996; Benjamin et al., 1993; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992), deficiencies in college preparation (Pavel, 1999; Lee, 1997; Gilbert, 1996; Hill, 1991), the need for summer bridge programs (Robert & Thomson, 1994; Kleinfeld, Cooper, & Kyle, 1987), and inadequately trained teachers (Pavel, 1999; Wells, 1997; Almeida, 1996; Demmert, 1996; Bowker, 1992; Ledlow, 1992; Pavel & Colby, 1992; Rehyner, 1991).

Additionally, the lack of AI/AN role models in higher education is a major concern as well (Wells, 1997; Bowker, 1992; Wright, 1991; Hill, 1991; Falk & Aitken, 1984). Alcohol and drug problems are a well-documented problem in AI/AN communities that often begins long before college matriculation (Dehyle, 1992; Hodgkinson, 1992; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Rehyner, 1991; Curley, 1984). Educational opportunities for many AI/ANs is extremely limited because of the lack of a strong economic base and adequate financial aid (Almeida, 1999). As a result, many are either excluded from the academy or relegated to community colleges (Wells, 1997; Brown, 1996; Rendón & Garza, 1996; Wright, 1991; Boyer, 1989). Finally, the need for family support is paramount (Saggio, 2000; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987, & 1993; Bowker, 1992; Wright, 1991; Pavel, 1991).

Indeed, the importance of family background and support cannot be overstated. Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) research on American college students has shown the importance of family background as a pre-collegiate determinant to successful degree completion. The importance of family background has been shown to be an important determinant among high school AI/AN students as well (Pavel 1991; Pavel & Padilla, 1993).

Wright (1991) found that many AI/AN students lacked a significant base of parental support towards the idea of a college education. Bowker (1992) and Brown (1995) determined that family background and parental support (especially mothers and

grandmothers for female students) had a positive effect on retention. Martin and Farris (1994) determined that both the immediate and extended family have a vital part in the formation of decision-making and thus would be important in promoting retention as well. Falk and Aitken (1984) point out that the support of the family, extended family, and Indian community are important to those students who wish to attend college and to those who are already attending. Bennett (1997), a Sioux, cites the example of his grandmother in helping him to persist through the rigors of Dartmouth.

However, many AI/AN students do not have a strong family background to draw emotional support from when they enter college. For example, on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, counselors have described the problem of poor parenting as "multi-generational dysfunction" (Ichizawa, 1992, p. 11). The problems exhibited by the poor parenting include child neglect, fetal alcohol syndrome, crack cocaine usage, hallucinogens, and intravenous drug use.

Finally, very few studies are available that specifically document freshman retention rates for AI/AN students (see Wells, 1997; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). However, Rendón et al. (1997) in a self-reported survey indicated that the first-time freshman re-enrollment rate in four-year colleges for AI/AN students was 67.6% compared to 74.4% for all students. Also, Arizona State University's 1991-1997 average persistence rate for first-time, full-time AI/AN freshman was 56.1% based on data reported by Arizona State University's Office of Institutional Analysis (1999). Higher educational researchers have clearly identified the freshman year of college as a crucial time in the academic and social formation of college and university students

(Tinto, 1987 & 1993; Daughtry, 1992; Astin, 1991; Upcraft, 1991; Gardner, 1980 &1990; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). For students the freshman year is a critical time in determining the likelihood of continued persistence towards a bachelor's degree. Tinto (1993) determined that attrition for all full-time, first-time degree-seeking freshmen is 53.3% in four-year colleges, and 67.7% in two-year colleges. Thus, for all students the percentage of students who persist past the freshman year is less than 50%.

If the problem of academic persistence is difficult for students in general, it is even more difficult for minorities, and especially for AI/AN students. Wells (1989) determined that more than half of AI/AN students who leave college before their graduation do so in their freshman year. These figures are consistent with Wells's (1997) follow-up study in which he determined that the freshman retention rate for AI/AN students is 47%.

**Theoretical Orientation**

This paper utilizes theoretical underpinnings drawn from research involving both mainstream college students as well as research on minority students. This theoretical framework helps to illustrate some of the cognate research done by other researchers on the importance of the family's influence on the student in academic persistence while providing a superstructure on which Saggio's (2000) study and further research on the family's influence on institutional choice and AI/AN post-freshman retention can be postulated.

## Tinto

Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) work in higher education research is widely recognized as foundational to a good working knowledge of college student retention. His model is predicated on earlier work by Spady (1970), Durkheim (1951), and Van Gennep (1960). In essence, Tinto's model (1975, 1987, & 1993) postulates that for college students to successfully steer through the collegiate environment, they must be able to navigate the educational system by "fitting into" the institution, thus avoiding institutional departure. Tinto's longitudinal model (1993, p. 114) takes into account many features including family background.

For Tinto, the onus is upon the student to make a proper "fit" into the institutional fabric. Tinto (1987 & 1993) postulates that a student's family background coupled with skills and abilities and prior schooling has an impact on goals and commitments made by the student related to institutional experiences, academic and social integration, refining of goals and commitments, and decisions related to institutional departure.

Figure 1 on the next page displays Tinto's (1987 & 1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure.

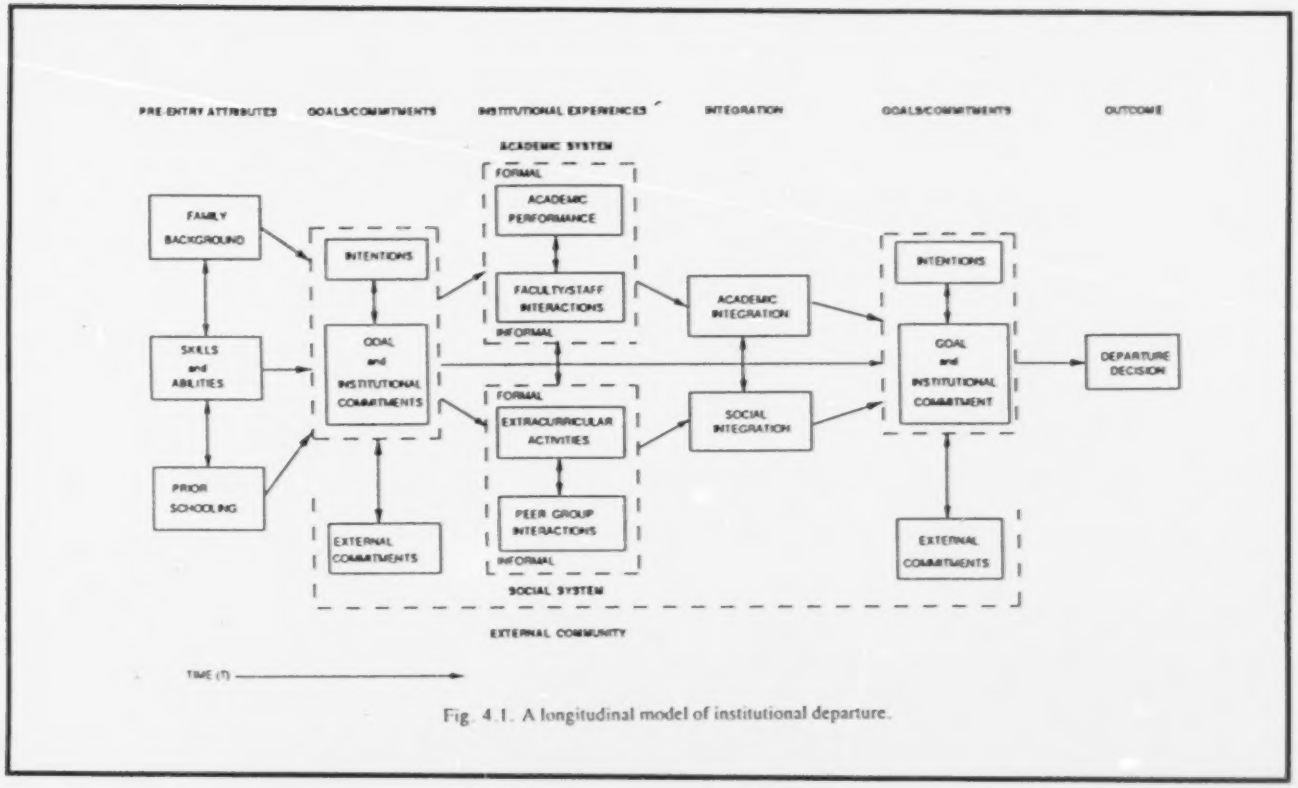


Fig. 4.1. A longitudinal model of institutional departure.

Figure 1: Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure.

Note: From *Leaving College* (p. 114), by V. Tinto, 1993, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. © 1987, 1993 by the University of Chicago Press. Reprinted with permission.

## Jalomo

Jalomo's (1995) study involved semi-structured focus group interviews of first year Latino/a students at two different community colleges in the southwestern United States. Jalomo (1995) documented many elements that both facilitated and impeded first year student progress, including both supportive and unsupportive family members. Supportive family members encouraged students to pursue their postsecondary intentions. However, some students experienced discomfort in their relationships with family who were not supportive of their efforts. These non-supportive family members sometimes pulled away relationally from the college student. Jalomo's (1995) study also reported that married students with family obligations had greater difficulty becoming involved with the college community.

## Tierney and Wright

Finally, Tierney's (1991, 1992, & 1995) and Wright and Tierney's (1991) findings are important because they are predicated upon research conducted with AI/AN students. In particular, Tierney's (1991) study takes a distinctively different approach towards discussion of retention of AI/AN students than other researchers do when discussing mainstream college students. Tierney's (1992) work posits a critical theorist perspective, viewing the problem of AI/AN retention as systemic rather than an issue of individual decision-making (Tinto, 1975, 1987, & 1993) or one of individual "student involvement" (Astin, 1984, 1985a, & 1985b). Tierney (1992 & 1995) and Tierney and Wright (1991) eschew the idea of a monolithic model of higher education and believe that institutions must make systemic adaptations to ensure AI/AN persistence.

Like Saggio (2000), Tierney (1992) and Wright and Tierney (1991) recognized the importance of the family structure within AI/AN societies. Their research findings underscore the importance of family influence in both institutional choice and persistence. They also recognize how AI/ANs often put family needs ahead of their own educational aspirations. Tierney (1991) also notes that AI/AN students are known to return home for family religious ceremonies even if that means missing a class or exam. Tierney (1991, p. 36) succinctly summarizes this declaring, "Family obligations are paramount for most Indian students."

In the next section the retention rate of American Indian College, the focus institution of Saggio's (2000) study is discussed. The freshman retention rate of the Bible college is favorable when compared with other institutions serving AI/AN students, and especially when compared with national self-reported data from institutions serving AI/AN students.

**American Indian College Freshman Retention**

American Indian College has a higher freshman retention rate for AI/ANs than either the reported national findings quantified by Rendón et al. (1997) or Arizona State University. Table 1 displays the freshman retention rate from 1994 to 1999 as well as the mean percentage of those years.

Table 1

American Indian College Freshman Retention Rates 1994-1999

| 1994-1995 | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | Mean % Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 81.6% | 55.6% | 82% | 76% | 86% | 76.2% |

Source: American Indian College, Office of Institutional Research

Note: The retention rate is for all students and not just AI/AN students. However, the ethnic composition of American Indian College ranged between 65-77% AI/AN from the years 1994-1999. Thus, AI/AN students are the primary ethnic group comprising the College.

AIC's mean reported freshman retention rate (76.2%) is close to the retention rate reported for all college students (74.4%) attending four year colleges in 1995-1996 by Rendón et al. (1997), surpassing the 67.6% freshman retention rate for American Indian students in that study.

Table 2

First to Second Year College Re-enrollment Rates for First-Time, Full-Time Students in Four-Year Colleges by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 1995-1996 Academic Year (by Percent)

| 4-Yr, Full | All Students | African American | American Indian | Asian-Pacific Islan | Hispanic | White, Non-Hisp |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 74.4 | 72.0 | 67.6 | 80.8 | 70.3 | 74.4 |
| Females | 76.1 | | | | | |
| Males | 72.3 | | | | | |

Note: Number of cities reported: 12 Number of four-year colleges reported: 18

Source: Student Academic Progress: Key Data Trends Baseline 1995-1996 (October 1997). Prepared by L. I. Rendón, Amaury Nora, Wendy L. Gans, and Mistalene D. Calleroz, p. 13

Findings for Arizona State University are very similar to the national survey undertaken by Rendón et al. (1997), albeit the average persistence rate from 1991-1997 (56.1%) is lower than the 1995-1996 rate (67.6%) reported by them in 1997. At ASU, American Indians had the lowest retention rate of all groups reporting (56.1%) versus Asian Americans who had a high of 76.8% for the average of 1991-1997. In fact, American Indians had a much lower persistence rate than minority students in general (71.0%).

Table 3

Arizona State University Persistence Summary First-Time, Full-Time Freshman to Sophomore Year Persistence; 1991-1997 Averages

| All Students | All Minorities | African-American | American Indian | Asian American | Hispanic | White |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 71.2% | 71.0% | 67.9% | 56.1% | 76.8% | 72.2% | 71.2% |

Source: Arizona State University, University Office of Institutional Analysis, 1999

Finally, Wells (1997) determined in his survey that the freshman retention rate for AI/N students was even lower, a mere 46.7%. All of these statistics suggest that perhaps AI/AN students have a better chance of persisting to the sophomore year in an environment where there are a higher percentage of other AI/AN students present.

The next section gives a brief description of the methodology that was employed in Saggio's (2000) study.

## Method

Saggio's (2000) study utilized a qualitative approach through the use of four focus groups that generated data that was used to construct conceptual models to display the findings. The protocol was designed by adapting questions used by Jalomo (1995) in his study of freshman Latino/a students at two different community colleges. The questions in Saggio's (2000) study were pre-screened by three Native staff members of the College who were sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the students. The questions contained in the protocol were pre-screened in order to avoid causing discomfort or embarrassment to the study participants.

Next, focus groups and post-sessions were transcribed from audiotapes and the data was inductively analyzed using Folio VIEWS 4.2 (Open Market, 1998), a text based management software used in qualitative research. The data analysis yielded initial taxonomies (Spradley, 1979), which were later modified into conceptual models. Although their specific approaches were not used, ideas were gleaned from previous cognate studies conducted by Melchior-Walsh (1994) and Jalomo (1995).

Before the initial taxonomies were modified into concept models, three senior Native administrators examined the taxonomies to ensure that initial analysis was not colored by research bias. Only minor modifications of the taxonomies were recommended and implemented.

Once the taxonomies were agreed upon, Saggio (2000) constructed the conceptual models that displayed the experiences both individually and in aggregate form and how they affected institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman

year. The concept model displaying how family influenced both institutional choice and post-freshman persistence is presented in this paper.

## Site Description

All of the focus groups were conducted at the American Indian College, a Bible college affiliated with the Assemblies of God and located in Phoenix, Arizona. 78% of the 81 students were AI/AN at the time of the study (Spring 2000). A total of 29 students were interviewed, comprising 47% of the AI/AN population at the school (N=62). 18 of the 27 tribes at the school were represented in the focus groups. The tribes included in the study are as follows: White Mountain Apache, Navajo, Eskimo, (Inupiat), Hopi, Flathead Crow, Pima, Tohono O'odham, Chumash, Eskimo (Tsimpsiam), Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Kiowa, Comanche, Ute, Quinault, Assinaboine, and Northern Cheyenne.

The site selection was significant because of the high freshman retention rate of 86% (American Indian College, Office of Institutional Research, 2000) from the 1999 academic year, just prior to Saggio's (2000) study.

## Strengths

Strengths of Saggio's (2000) research design include pre-screening the focus group questions, the use of three senior AI/AN staff serving as key informants to assist in understanding the preliminary data results, and also using an AI/AN administrator of the college as the moderator. The Bible college had a total student population of 81

students of which 62 (78%) were AI/AN. Of those 62 students, 29 (47%) chose to participate, creating a sample size nearly half the size of the total population. Finally, the gender balance of the participants (males:13/29= 45%, females:16/29 = 55%) was fairly even, thus safeguarding the study against results that were strongly biased by gender.

## Limitations

Limitations of the research design included the small number of tribes (27) represented at the college compared to 557 federally recognized tribes (Russell, 1997) throughout the United States, the non-random use of participants in the study, and the small size of the institution limited the total amount of eligible students that could have participated in the focus groups. As a result, the findings of Saggio's (200) study cannot be generalized to AI/AN students at public institutions because of the unique dynamics of a Bible college and the religious composition of its students that differs from the majority of AI/AN people.

## Ethical Concern

Saggio's (2000) study also raised one ethical concern, that of the relationship of the researcher to the institution. Care was taken to avoid a dual relationship by having the researcher take a leave of absence from his assigned duties as dean during the course of the study and provide an informed consent form that protected the participants from any type of undue influence as a result of their participation.

## Findings

The findings of Saggio's (2000) study revealed four grounded concepts that affect institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year. The grounded concepts were family, spirituality, life experiences, and institutional culture. However, as previously stated, this paper focuses exclusively on discussion of the influence of family on institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year.

Analysis of the focus group data indicated that the family was highly influential in the first year experiences of the AI/AN students. Students who were seeking to decide whether or not to attend college were advised and influenced by family members. Family as described by the participants included both immediate and extended family members. Thus, family included parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, spouses, and children. In Saggio's (2000) study, participants experienced family influence both positively and negatively.

### Positive Family Influence in College Choice

#### Encouraged to Attend

Some of the participants indicated that the family influenced them by encouraging them to attend college, sometimes specifically encouraging them to attend Bible college. For one female student, the decision to attend Bible college came from her mother: "Normally when mother speaks I go. Because basically that's the way I was raised. That's the only reason I came."

Another woman student was also encouraged to attend by her mother who had attended a Christian college when she was younger. Like the first student, the mother of the second student also thought it was a good idea for her daughter to attend a Christian college:

> The first time I knew I wanted to go to college was my mother who had the idea for me to go--come to this college because it was a Christian college. . . . I just took it by chance, just to try it out and when I came I took Bible classes and I like the atmosphere and the teachers . . .

Positive family influence to attend college also came from other members of the family such as spouses. For example, one middle-aged married student was very apprehensive about going to college at her age. Her husband was instrumental in advising her to attend college:

> Well, my husband played a major role in my coming to college . . . he kept encouraging me the whole time. I kept having doubts and backing out and saying, "No this is not going to work." And he kept saying, "No, you can do it." And so he was the primary person that was there to back me up and cushion me back into returning to school.

Encouraged by Example

This young woman had dreamed of going to a Bible college since she was a child. Her father, along with her aunts and uncles were listed as positive motivators towards her attending a Bible college because they had also attended one:

> I guess I can relate to [Student] because my father and my aunts and my uncles had gone to school here and they had come to [Name of community] Assembly of God where I used to go before and they would tell how wonderful the school was. One of my heart's desire[s] was to come here and I had just never seen the place but I always wanted to come here. I made a decision when I was eight years old so it's always been a part of me that I wanted to come here.

This male student credits his parents with influencing him to attend Bible college because they had also attended the school:

> The reason that I came here was both my mom and dad got their education here and so I figured if they got something out then maybe I could.

Encouraged to Succeed

The family of some of the students encouraged attendance at a Bible college because they saw that as an opportunity for the student to succeed there. These

exemplars show in part that family members were concerned that few of their own relatives had succeeded; therefore they wanted to see the participants succeed at college. This male student was told by his uncle that he thought the student would succeed where his other relatives had not:

> . . . well, I had an uncle who told me, "[Name], you know all the other cousins didn't seem to do too good in college and make it. But I really feel in my heart that you are going to be one of the ones to make it."

Likewise, this young man felt an urgency to succeed because no one in his family had been successful in college. He felt that he needed to take initiative and be a positive example within his family by succeeding:

> . . . but the major influence is my parents had placed inside of me was to make something of my life--do something in my life because I haven't had many relatives that have succeeded, as a matter of fact I don't recall any of my relatives succeeding in college or anything and I wanted to make a difference in my family . . .

## Negative Family Influence in Choosing a College

### Bias Against Bible Colleges

As participants shared their stories of how their families influenced them to attend college, a few participants indicated that they received negative as well as positive influences leading up to their first year experiences. The negativity shared by the participants centered specifically on the choice of the institution. Some of the participants came from families that were not Christian and who had little regard for the type of training that could be obtained at a Bible college. Rather than seeing it as a place where the student could succeed, they felt that attending there would limit the student's opportunities to succeed.

For one female student, her father, along with her uncles was very discouraging towards her attending a Bible college:

> I had just met my dad during high school and he wasn't used to having a family member be a Christian and he just kept saying, "You don't need to go to there, just go to the one in [name of community]. You'll be closer to home and your family wants you home." Because I had just met my dad I wanted to please him. But I wasn't really happy with the decision, so it was mainly my father and my uncles--they were like, "What're you gonna do with that degree anyway? You know, all Indians should stay on the rez." And it was kind of like they were the main ones that discouraged me from coming to college.

Another young woman had a similar experience, identifying one of her uncles as a negative family influence:

> I think for me it would be my uncle, he's not saved and so he kind of said "What're you going to do with that degree, with a Christian Education degree?" And it was just kind of like, it made me think because you know, I guess his thinking was--the money, you know where are you going to get a job that will pay you good money with that degree?

This young man said that his family was extremely unsupportive of his wish to attend a Bible college because they thought that a Christian college would have an indoctrinating affect on him:

> I think for me it was, my family because they're not saved and I was in rehab during the time in like my eighth month when I got accepted and they didn't--they don't really know much about Christianity, they're like, "Ah, you're just brain-washed. It's them that's putting the stuff in your head. You'll be back."

## Family Influence Positively Affecting Retention

The family's influence did not end once a student matriculated in college; it continued. Focus group participants indicated that during times of discouragement they

received validation from family members who helped them to remain in college during turbulent times.

Encouraged to Succeed

Once the student had made it to college some of the family members worked at encouraging the students to persevere and succeed. This student credited his mother with helping him to persist in college. He poignantly shared his love and appreciation for her belief in him to succeed in college:

> For me, I'd have to say it was my mom. Growing up, it wasn't really that great. Before I came here I was still getting into trouble. I was trying to change but it was hard. But every time I needed someone, every time I got in trouble with the law or anything, she was always there. She was the one who was filling out all the paperwork to help me get here. I can finally do something that's positive--that can put a smile on her face, to let her know I'm succeeding. It makes me feel good that I can do something good.

On a similar note, this female student shared the importance of her father's encouragement that helped her even when she was a great distance away and had to talk by phone to stay in touch:

> He was always saying he could help me through anything and he's always telling me how proud he is of me. He always told me, "You're already halfway through your first year. Hey, look you already got one year done." He's always really encouraging me and keeping me going.

Finally, this student had a number of relatives also attending the College who encouraged her during difficult times:

> I had several cousins who were here at the college at the same time I was here. There was my older brother, three of my cousins, and also two other, three or four other people from our church. I felt like I was at home because they were there. They gave me comfort: they were there to encourage me and help me through whatever I needed.

Encouraged Spiritually

Encouragement that came from family members also included spiritual encouragement. In other words, encouragement was not just limited to academic success, but also included the spiritual dimension of seeking God's blessing in one's higher educational experience. This female student credited her father with helping her to remain in college and to rely on her faith in God to help her when she encountered difficulties in her college experiences:

> Mine would be my dad because anytime I have a difficult situation that I can't get out of, he's always telling me and reminding me that there are people out there even though he's not here that care about me from friends and faculty. "You can't do it on your own. You always have to rely on God."

This female student gave credit to her mom as well as her brother for giving her spiritual encouragement to succeed in college:

> But they really put a lot of encouragement in me through God and they said to never give up on God and stuff like that. But it was my mom and my brother that really encouraged me to come to school and even up to this day they still do. If I do wrong they get on my case about it and they sit me down . . .

Finally, this woman credited her parents with their spiritual support when she became homesick and felt like leaving college:

> I think that the thing that got me through the first year here was my parents. There were many times I called home because it was my first time away from home for a long period of time, and when situations came up, I was on the phone crying, "Mommy, I want to come home! I want to

come home!" My mom would just tell me, "You can make it." Or, "We're here. We're praying for you."

Encouraged by Example

Although many AI/AN students are first generation college students, several of the students did have family members who had attended college themselves and served as encouraging examples to these students. In this third type of encouragement to persist in college, the students indicated that in part they were able to succeed past their first year because they had role models within the family that encouraged them onwards. This male student had several relatives who had attended the Bible college and graduated. He was encouraged by their example to enroll and succeed:

> The thing that helped me . . . to succeed . . . [and] encourage me was two older brothers--and I have a bunch of more cousins--that came here and they kind of influenced part of my decision . . . I saw the changes that both of my brothers took from coming here.

This female student was encouraged to enroll in college when she saw the enormous obstacles her own mother had overcome and still maintain good grades. This encouraged her to want to succeed in college herself:

> I saw [my mom] going back to college and after a lot of trauma that happened after I had my baby she helped me out and she still got straight A's that semester that I had gotten sick. That was when my daughter was just a newborn and so I was thinking, "Man, if she can do it, why can't I?"

## Family Negatively Influencing Retention

The data clearly show that the family can be a strong enhancer to persistence past the freshman year. Support from parents, siblings, cousins, spouses, and children can be very meaningful. Still, as focus group participants told their stories, a few indicated that the family and its needs sometimes precluded college persistence. Many students felt enormous responsibilities toward their families that made them consider dropping out of school.

### Family Responsibilities

One woman returning to college in middle age had many family members who were skeptical about her desire to remain in college at this point in her life because of the family needs that existed back home. They put enormous pressure on her to drop out and return home to her community to assist with family needs:

> . . . every time I'd call home all I ever heard was negative things like "You're too old. You shouldn't be away down there. You need

> to come home. You need to be around your family. You're having a hard time. You don't have no finances, then come home. All you're going to be for the rest of your life is paying off this bill. And what are you going to do with this degree when you graduate? You'll be fifty years old, you know. It's not going to do you any good, and you got grandkids and we need you down here, you know. "

This young woman felt like she should leave school shortly after arriving because of problems back at home:

> For me, it was my family. There was things going on in my family with my brother like two months after I came to college, and I remember going home for the weekend and then that night there the cops were looking for my brother 'cause he had gotten in a fight with his girlfriend. He had a pistol and, that night I was just thinking about it that whole night, "Should I stay home?"

This male student had difficulties in his home involving his stepfather and the stepfather's relationship to the family. He felt that perhaps he should remain at home and drop out of school because of the unstable home situation:

> . . . back at home I got a stepfather and he's not saved. My mom's saved and probably the only thing that really almost kept me from going back to college was my family. 'Cause I didn't know--I wanted to make sure that my mom was taken care of and I wanted to make sure my little brothers had the best, and I just wanted to be there for my family and God. If it wasn't for God . . . like telling me that He could take care of my family better than I can: "I love your family more than you ever could love them." He said, "Just leave them in my hands and just go where I want you to go." The only thing that would have probably held me back was my family . . . 'cause if it wasn't for God's word that day I would have never came back to school.

Family Financial Difficulties

Most of the students in the study came from low-income families. Even with the help of financial aid, college costs were very high for students and many found it very expensive to remain in school. Focus group participants saw financial difficulties as a leading cause of students experiencing difficulty in persistence. This young married student had financial troubles that nearly forced her to drop out of school. She tearfully related how relatives living with them financially drained them, making it very difficult at times to remain in school:

I almost didn't come back this semester because I live with [relatives] and it's really hard because they're really--not to be mean--but they're just like lazy. They don't help or they say they don't have money--but they do. They don't help us pay our bills, I said, "I feel like I could leave and then you'd have one less mouth to feed." And [my husband] would say, "You don't need to say that. This is God's will and you're not supposed to be saying that." . . . so I told him, "I don't want to go back, I want to . . . work and help you to pay up for my share of the rent and for the food and stuff like that." He said, "No, you don't need to think like that. You just need to pray about it." So I made myself really strong and I told God, "God, if it's your will for me to go to school, provide a way for me and stuff." I really praise God because He's given me--my husband a better job that pays him like fifteen dollars an hour, ten hours a day and he works at night, and [God] has even provided us with that car that was paid for by my mother-in-law. So, it's like "God, you're really making a way for us. You're just opening the doors."

This young woman saw her family going through financial difficulties because of her parents' separation. She considered leaving school to assist with needs at home:

My mom, she was going through some difficult times at home because she was separating from my step dad. It was like she was doing three

> jobs on her own. So I felt like I was needed at home-- maybe to help out with the kids and . . . helping her out, maybe working--that was my worry.

Finally, this student expressed how it was very difficult for her to remain in school because of the family's financial needs:

> I think mine was finances. . . . with my husband the only one working, I felt sometimes that I needed to be at home to be a mom to my children. Also I needed to be at times working and helping pay bills. When we were getting behind and stuff, that was a big discouragement sometimes to me to where I wanted to just quit going to school and stay home and do what I needed to do.

Figure 2 on the next page displays the concept of family as an influence in both institutional choice and persistence. The family can influence positively or negatively. Note that family encouragement occurs both as the student is formulating a decision on where to attend college and in deciding to stay in college.

The next section compares the findings of this study with the theoretical orientation discussed earlier in the paper. Similarities and differences between Saggio's (2000) findings and the theoretical underpinnings discussed earlier are highlighted.

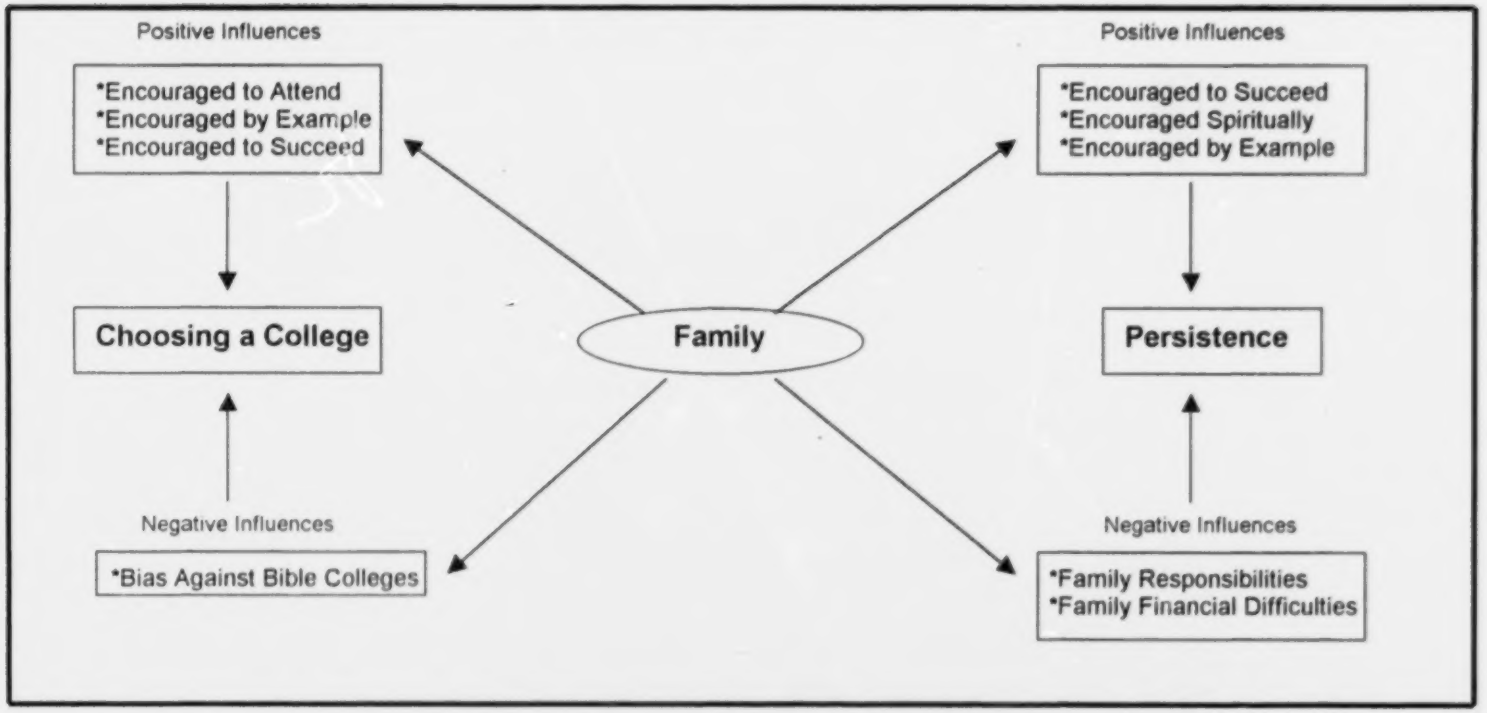


Figure 2: Family influence in both institutional choice and persistence

## Discussion of Findings

In this section Saggio's (2000) research findings on family influence on institutional choice and post-freshman persistence will be discussed vis-à-vis the major theoretical perspectives presented earlier in this paper. The theories of Tinto, Jalomo, and Wright and Tierney will be compared with Saggio's (200) research findings in an effort to highlight similarities and differences. Discussion begins with a comparison with Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) findings.

### Comparison With Tinto

Tinto (1975, 1987, & 1993) notes that the family's background will have an impact on the student's ability to persist. This is consistent with the results gained in Saggio's (2000) study involving AI/AN students. In Saggio's (2000) study, students indicated that the level of supportiveness they gained from their family influenced their desire to persist. AI/AN students who had non-supportive family members encountered greater difficulties in persisting beyond the freshman year.

Tinto (1993) defines family background "as measured by social status, parental education, and size of community." (p. 115). Several of the Bible college students indicated that their parents also attended a Bible college and that they felt this positively influenced them in their attempts to persist. Since this study did not look at students who did *not* persist it would be difficult to predict whether family background that did not include some college graduates had a negative impact on students who dropped out.

Next, Jalomo's (1995) study involving Latino/a students is compared vis-à-vis the family's influence on persistence with the AI/AN students in Saggio's (2000) study.

## Comparison with Jalomo

Jalomo's (1995) study focused on how Latino/a community college students navigated their freshman year. As such, many issues were uncovered in the study pursuant to the experiences of these students at two different community colleges in the southwestern United States. However, Jalomo's (1995) study did uncover a couple of similar findings with Saggio's (2000) study of AI/AN post-freshman persistence.

First, Jalomo (1995) identifies the family as one of five major subcultures that impact Latino/a community college students as they navigate their freshman year. Saggio's (2000) study indicated that the influence of the family was one of four key experiences impacting both institutional choice and persistence. Thus, both studies concur in the importance of the family.

Jalomo's (1995) study participants indicated that the family was an important source of moral support, even for first generation college students. In Saggio's (2000) study some of the participants were first generation college students, but some students had family members who had attended the Bible college. In both studies, participants reported the importance of family support as they navigated their collegiate experiences.

Both studies also noted that non-supportive family members impeded the pursuit of higher education and subsequent acculturation into the campus community. Jalomo (1995) noted that some participant's family members pulled away sensing that the students thought they were "better" than them. Saggio (2000) noted that some family members were unsupportive of the students enrolling in a Bible college.

Finally, both studies noted the difficulties encountered when family responsibilities interfered with studies. In both studies married students expressed frustration at carrying financial responsibilities along with an academic course load.

Next, discussion turns to a comparison of the findings of Saggio's (2000) research with that conducted by Tierney (1992) and Wright and Tierney (1991).

## Comparison With Wright and Tierney

Saggio's (2000) study at a Bible college showed that AI/AN students encountered a great deal of cognitive dissonance when weighing their educational aspirations against family needs. The study at the Bible college interviewed several students who indicated that family needs caused them to consider dropping out. These Bible college students, like the students in Tierney 's (1992) and Wright and Tierney's (1991) research also had strong family ties and had to decide when to allow family obligations to override their desire for a college education.

Since Tierney's (1992) study focused on AI/AN students, it is not surprising that his findings in the area of family influence are similar to those encountered in this study. Tierney (1992) clearly recognizes the importance of family in the persistence process and underscores the need for institutions to recognize the importance of family to AI/ANs. Students should not be made to choose between loyalty to their family and their education as Western educators are sometimes prone to push.

Tierney's (1992) research did not focus on AI/AN students from a sectarian Bible college as Saggio's (2000) research did. Instead, in Tierney's (1992) study 200 interviews took place at ten postsecondary institutions (including four tribal colleges)

with a sizeable Native American enrollment. Still, the ethnic family dynamics noted in his study are very similar to the findings of Saggio's (2000) research at a Bible college. Both studies strongly underscore the importance of family to academic persistence.

In the next section of this paper discussion ensues as to how scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts can properly accommodate and respect the role of the family among AI/AN students in higher educational institutions.

## Recommendations

### Scholars

Scholars seeking to advance theoretical understanding must be cognizant of how the family's influence affects every aspect of the student's experience at an institution, even before (s)he has decided which institution to attend. As retention theory is advanced, scholars need to develop models that take into account the enormous influence the family has on both enrollment and persistence.

Scholars need to also monitor the changing dynamics of the family since mainstream family models are changing dramatically in America with increasing numbers of blended families, single parent families, families with parents having same sex partners, etc. As mainstream families change, cross-over dynamics will undoubtedly affect AI/AN families as well-- especially those that are more acculturated to the mainstream society. This will bring challenges and tension to the existing body of knowledge about AI/AN families. Thus, the writer recommends that further research be

done on the changing dynamics of AI/AN families in order to keep pace with changes within that population group.

Practitioners

Institutions serving significant numbers of AI/AN students should keep the importance of the family's influence in mind when working with AI/AN students. Practitioners such as student affairs professionals must be aware that when they recruit AI/AN students they must attempt to involve various members of the student's family in the recruitment process since they have a strong influence. This may vary somewhat from tribe to tribe. For example, Bowker (1992) found that for Navajo females, the maternal influence was particularly strong. Therefore, the recruitment strategy must be tribal-sensitive and recruitment personnel must be appropriately trained in dealing with the diversity of the tribes represented at their respective institutions. Recruitment practices should be reviewed periodically as new tribal groups are added to the pool of applicants and as family dynamics change to a significant degree among AI/ANs.

Also, recruiters for religious colleges must be especially careful when recruiting students whose parents are not of the same religious persuasion. The recruiters should try to establish common ground with the family members who are of a different religious background and attempt to establish the merits of the institution they represent, extolling the values that these family members will also appreciate.

Classroom instructors need to be aware that for AI/AN students the family's influence extends to the need for students to intervene in various family emergencies, take longer times away than many other students to attend funerals, etc. Training

should be provided to those educators working with significant numbers of AI/AN students so that they can be sensitive to these students, and accommodate the students' needs, thus helping them to remain in the educational pipeline.

Policy Analysts

Finally, policy analysts should also be aware of the enormous influence of the family. When funding amounts are established, governmental agencies must be cognizant of the family responsibilities falling on many students--especially students with family financial responsibilities. Since many AI/ANs fall at or near poverty level, expected financial contributions by the family are often quite low. Funding should be adequate enough so that AI/AN students will not be placed in the unenviable position of having to choose between their education and family financial responsibilities.

The summary and conclusion section of this paper capsulizes the key findings of Saggio's (2000) study along with brief references to cognate research followed by recommendations for future research.

## Summary and Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine Saggio's (2000) findings on how family influences both institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year of college of AI/AN students at a Bible college. Clearly, research such as Tinto's (1975, 1987 & 1993), Jalomo's (1995), and Tierney's (1991) and Wright and Tierney's (1991 & 1992) underscores the importance influence that family does have on college students.

Saggio's (2000) study showed that families influence both positively and negatively institutional choice as well as persistence beyond the freshman year. Therefore scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts must be cognizant of how the family impacts AI/AN students, especially as to academic persistence. Also, as the dynamics of family change in mainstream society, there will undoubtedly be changes within the dynamics of AI/AN families as well.

Though Saggio's (2000) study cannot be generalized because of its use of a qualitative mode of inquiry that made use of non-random participants, the similarity of findings to Jalomo's (1995) study and Tierney's (1992) and Wright and Tierney's (1991) findings suggest a similar thread among some students of color that warrant further investigation. There may be many more similarities between Latino/a students, AI/AN students, and other students of color that should be explored further.

Also, Tinto's (1975, 1987 & 1993) research says that family influence among mainstream college and university students is an important part of the decision-making process in institutional departure. Indeed, it may be appropriate to recommend that some quantitative studies be conducted among AI/AN students to further investigate the dynamics of how the family affects both institutional choice and persistence for that population group. The quantitative studies would allow researchers to have data that can be generalized.

Indeed, it is incumbent upon educational researchers to further investigate the impact that the family has on both institutional choice and persistence among AI/AN students. This group has been underrepresented within the academy too long and

every effort needs to be made to better understand how best to help AI/AN students assume a more prominent place within American higher education.

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